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THREE KINDS OF BEAUTY

(Lecture delivered by Master Sheng Yen
Sunday, January 13, 1985)

Buddha gave the Surangama Sutra because of Ananda's involvement with a beautiful woman named Matangi. She fell in love with him, and Ananda was at first very attracted to her. This attraction illustrates the first kind, or level, of beauty -- beauty judged by feelings, emotions, or desire.

Later, Buddha asks Ananda why he chose to follow him. Ananda replies that he became the Buddha's disciple because of his admiration for the thirty-two excellent characteristics of the Buddha's body and his desire to understand the nature of these extraordinary qualities. Ananda believes that the Buddha's beauty, his purple-gold color, could not have come from ordinary parents. Such beauty could only come from practice in this life and from practice in previous lives. This is very different from the beauty he sees in Matangi. This is a second kind of beauty, which is based on reason and rational judgment.

But the Buddha tells Ananda that his reason for leaving home is wrong. Even Ananda's perception of the thirty-two excellent characteristics is a delusion. Sentient beings have wandered in samsara, the cycle of birth and death, precisely because of such delusions. Sentient beings are lost in these delusions because they do not know their true mind, their true self-nature, which is pure, unchanging, and eternal.

We must recognize that something that is really true or genuine, has to be beautiful. Something truly beautiful has to be virtuous. Such truth or beauty never changes. If it did change, it would not be truly beautiful, truly virtuous, truly true. Everyone speaks of beauty, virtue, and truth, but are the things that we see, or think we see, really beautiful, virtuous, or true? No.

Most of us only see things through our delusions. What we see, or think that we see, as beautiful, is not truly beautiful. Nor are these things truly virtuous or true. It is only when we are free from our delusions that our self-nature can be described as true, virtuous, and beautiful. This is the third level of beauty, which is also called "wondrous illumination" or "wondrous brightness." This kind of beauty is judged from the experience of enlightenment, not from desire or reason.

There are many reasons for our inability to see the highest beauty -- we are continually beset by problems with our bodies, our feelings, our emotions. And we have these problems because what we think our life is is an illusion. We may think we are real, but we are not real. We may treat something very seriously, take it as real, but again, the thing that we treat as real is not real. Our environment is constantly changing, and this influences us to change as well. We change constantly because the environment changes, and the environment changes because of changing causes and conditions.

We don't know what will happen to us from one day to the next. This uncertainty makes us want to change what we have for something that may be better. We may find that we were better off with what we discarded, get it back again, and be dissatisfied all over again. This is a never-ending process, because in a world that is constantly changing, nothing is true. Nothing is truly beautiful.

Ultimately, we may become like a student of mine who keeps moving from America to Taiwan and back again in search of a perfect situation. We are always changing, changing jobs, changing locations, changing girlfriends, boyfriends, changing everything, and never satisfied. The more you change, the poorer the outcome will be. The more you change, the more vexations you will have.

I once saw a cartoon about Elizabeth Taylor. She was standing next to a man, and she was announcing her seventh marriage. The crowd around her paid no attention -- she has had so many marriages that another one is no longer news. Her emotional life must be pretty unstable, or why would she keep changing husbands? A life filled with so much change cannot be a happy one.

Often people will fall in love with one another out of pure desire, even though they may call it love. There is no reason in it at all. There is no real interaction with the other as a whole person with special qualities, but just attraction to superficial beauty. If a girl sees a handsome, good-looking man who she's attracted to, she may not stop to consider his character. He may be a beast. Without thinking, she may go right after him. If it is a handsome man with many girls to choose from, she may be left hurt and alone. I know of one case in Taiwan of a housewife who left her husband and children for a no-good club owner who eventually rejected her. She was left with nothing.

The first kind of beauty, which is what is involved in such situations, is completely unreal, but nonetheless, this is where most of us live. We should try to recognize what is truly beautiful and what is superficially beautiful. This way we can try to lead stable, relatively pure lives. When we reach this point, we still must keep in mind that there is nothing truly, eternally beautiful. Then we won't try to substitute what seems beautiful to us in the next moment for what we have in this one. We should be content with what we have, even though it may not always seem so beautiful. We should not try to constantly change what we have, hoping for something better, because, in the final analysis, these things are all false, unreal.

There is a story of an artist who married, and after a few days painted a picture for his wife. The picture showed a very old couple. He placed the painting near the album of their wedding ceremony. His wife didn't understand what the painting meant, so she asked her husband, "Who are these two people in the painting?" He said, "That's you and me. Now we are young and you look very beautiful. This painting shows what we'll be like 50 years from now." She complained, "I'm still young and good-looking. Why show me like this?" "It's true you're beautiful now, but in 50 years you won't look like you do in your 20's. Even then I will not be disappointed, or disenchanted, because I know now how you will look as the years pass by."

The beauty that we see around us is constantly changing, so it is really a false beauty. But this doesn't mean we should have no regard for the things we think are beautiful. Because the root of why such things are false lies in ourselves. We ourselves are false. So it's a good combination -- us together with someone or something that is falsely beautiful -- the false together with the false.

As we live so frequently on the first level of beauty, we have to first recognize that beautiful things are false, and then treat the false things as if they are true. This is just like an actor on a stage who knows very well that he is acting, but nonetheless, wants to put on a good show. He wants to do justice to the script, so he has to act skillfully.

On the second level of beauty, reason, not simply desire is most important. When we think something is beautiful, there are reasons, not just feelings, behind our assessment. And if we ourselves become beautiful, there is a reason behind the transformation.

When we judge things by our reason, we will not be jealous of beauty or success in others. We can recognize that their achievement or talent is greater than ours, and we will not be tempted to criticize or undermine them. If we understand how someone has become beautiful, happy, or successful, we may become like them.

When we do not appreciate beauty, achievement, or happiness by our reason, jealousy may develop, and the consequences can be unfortunate. There is a fable in a sutra of a father and his two sons. The father enjoyed nothing more than having them massage his legs. The younger would massage the left leg, the elder would work on the right. Eventually each brother became jealous of the other, thinking that the father enjoyed the other's massaging more. Independently, each one got the idea that if he cut off the leg massaged by his rival, he would be the sole benefactor of his father's good will. Consequently, the father was left with no legs. Had each son concentrated simply on doing his part to make his father happy, and appreciated the contribution made by his brother, their father would not be a cripple who would probably disown both of them.

In romantic relationships jealousy may lead a rejected or suspicious partner to do harm to, or even murder, the suspected partner. Such cases are common in Taiwan, and from what I understand, in the United States, too.

Achieving success or attaining beauty depends upon how much effort you put forth. According to Dharma, you can get whatever you want -- it depends on your heart and your effort. If you work hard and you don't attain your goal in this lifetime, you can try again in the next lifetime. You must wait until you have exerted the necessary amount of effort and accumulated enough merit.

What we begin with in this life depends on our previous actions. I had a disciple, a monk, in Taiwan who had a weak voice -- you could hardly hear him when he chanted, and this caused him great embarrassment. I told him that in a previous life, he must have broken a temple bell or treated the gongs and bells with disrespect, and so ended up with a poor voice. Similarly, I knew a mother and daughter from Taiwan when I was in Japan. The daughter was quite unattractive, and she complained to her mother about it, who said, "Don't blame me. This must have happened because you stole flowers from a temple in a previous life. Now you should give donations to a temple, or decorate a temple, and you'll be much better looking in your next lifetime."

These examples above, of course, show strong faith and a religious point of view -- a belief in reincarnation. But effort is important even in this lifetime. You can bring about positive change if you try hard enough.

There was a young girl in Taiwan I knew who was really quite ugly -- she refused to leave her house, until a friend counseled her: "Don't think of yourself as ugly, it will just make things worse. Accept your appearance, and know that it was the way you were born. Be humble, considerate, and respectful toward others, and don't worry how you look." A couple of years later he met her again, and saw that her appearance had changed. You could see that it was the same person, but her features were softer, and she seemed to be more at ease. She had worked from within herself to change her life.

Another woman I met in Tainan, Taiwan is a good example of what effort and right attitude can accomplish. She was twenty-five when I met her, but she had contracted polio when she was three, so that she now had great difficulty in walking, and had developed a kind of a hunchback. However, she was very capable and determined. When I gave several lectures in Tainan, she took care of all the arrangements. I said to her, "You must have a difficult time doing all of this with your handicap." But she said, "No, it's precisely because of my physical problems that people go out of their way to make things easier for me, so sometimes I have to be thankful for my disability." The woman did not have a trace of self-pity in her, and she was always able to accomplish a great deal. She later married a man who was completely healthy and not disabled at all. It's easy to see how someone could appreciate this woman.

Now I will concentrate on the third kind of beauty. This is the highest level, and it involves a truth that cannot be perceived by ordinary people in their daily lives. Such people have minds of discrimination and self-centeredness, and what they see, or think they see, is only an illusion. The genuinely true can only be seen after extensive practice and enlightenment experience.

It is easy to be mistaken when trying to recognize the third kind of beauty. For example, we know a human body is neither truly beautiful nor pure, but even a Buddha's body with the thirty-two excellent characteristics, which may seem to be wondrously beautiful and pure and undefiled, can also experience death and vanish. Therefore, it is not truly beautiful, it is not truly true. The truly true is that which is neither arising nor perishing.

This idea is also expressed in the Diamond Sutra where the Buddha mentioned that some people consider a Buddha to be one who encompasses the thirty-two excellent characteristics. The Buddha showed that this is not correct: if the only criteria for a Buddha was having the thirty-two excellent characteristics, then the so called "diamond-wheel-turning holy king" (a mythological figure), who also has these characteristics, would be a Buddha; but he is not. These thirty-two characteristics are only a human manifestation. They appear only in this world. They do not constitute the ultimate, Dharma Body of the Buddha.

So what is that which is truly beautiful and truly pure? Today we will not have time to go into that, because the whole Surangama Sutra is about the truly beautiful and the truly pure. I will continue to speak about these things in my next lecture.

***** NEWSITEMS *****

August 7 - 11, Master Sheng-Yen is in Taiwan, and has given a lecture series on the Song of Enlightenment of Master Yung-Chia.

August 17- 19, Master Sheng-Yen conducted a ceremony to celebrate The Boddhisattva Earth-Store's birthday. Two young men and three young women had their heads shaved and received the Sramanera precepts. Lucy Lee attended the ceremony.

On September 8, Master Sheng-Yen started a lecture series on the Diamond Sutra.

A reminder -- Weekend Sitting Retreats are held each week.

All those interested in Monday or Wednesday night classes, please let the Center know.

We would like to thank the following people for subscribing to the Newsletter and Ch'an Magazine: J. Kurland, H. Wiemhoff, D. Kerns, and H. Young.

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